

Message Text

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 5202

NODIS CHEROKEE

FOR SECRETARY ONLY FROM MURPHY

E.O. 11652: XGDS-3

TAGS: PFOR, SY, US, LE

SUBJECT: AUGUST 7 MEETING WITH ASAD

REF: DAMASCUS 5148

1. SUMMARY: HAD GOOD MEETING WITH ASAD AUGUST 7 WHEN I CONVEYED YOUR PRIVATE MESSAGE AS WELL AS OTHER AGREED UPON TALKING POINTS. ASAD MUCH APPRECIATED OUR STATEMENT OF SUPPORT FOR AN INDEPENDENT NATIONAL POLICY. ADMISSTED HE HAD ERRED IN DISBELIEVING HIS OWN EARLY INTELLIGENCE REPORTS ABOUT AIRFIELD CONSTRUCTION IN SOUTHERN LEBANON. SPOKE WARMLY OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH KING HUSSEIN AND IMPLIED THROUGH HIS EXPRESSION OF CONFIDENCE IN KING THAT WE COULD ACCEPT HUSSEIN AS A CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION TO US. (I BELIEVE WE CAN EXPECT SOMEWHAT MORE PRECISION IN THIS AREA IN THE FUTURE.) PRESIDENT IS GLOOMY ABOUT FUTURE LEBANESE DEVELOPMENTS. HE BELIEVES OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES, PARTICULARLY SAUDI ARABIA, COULD BE MORE ACTIVE IN WORKING FOR A SOLUTION. RECOMMEND WE PROVIDE FURTHER INTELLIGENCE AT APPROPRIATE INTERVAL ON SOVIET ACTIVITY IN LEBANON. END SUMMARY

2. MET WITH ASAD AFTERNOON AUGUST 7 IN SESSION WHICH STRETCHED TO AN HOUR AND A QUARTER. FIRST HALF HOUR WAS WITH HIS INTERPRETER AND LAST 45 MINUTES BETWEEN JUST THE TWO OF US. IN FIRST HALF HOUR WE COVERED THE TALKING POINTS

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ABOUT PURPOSE OF MY TRIP TO WASHINGTON, TOUCHING ON THE

HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR INTELLIGENCE REPORTS

ABOUT MOSCOW'S MILITARY SUPPORT FOR THE PLO/LEBANESE LEFT. ASAD SAID HE HAD NOT SEEN THE MEMCON OF MY AUGUST 4 MEETING WITH KHADDAN WHICH GAVE DETAILS ON THESE ACTIVITIES. HOWEVER, SAID HE THOUGHT SUCH EXCHANGES USEFUL AND HOPED THAT THEY COULD BE REPEATED. I THEN ADVISED HIM THAT PRESIDENT FORD AND YOU HAD ASKED ME TO REAFFIRM FULL USG SUPPORT FOR SYRIA'S PURSUIT OF AN INDEPENDENT NATIONAL POLICY. EXPRESSED HOPE THAT IF HE FELT THIS THREATENED AT ANY TIME, HE WOULD INFORM US SO THAT WE MIGHT EXAMINE TOGETHER WHAT STEPS COULD BE TAKEN TO RELIEVE THE THREAT. SAID WE ARE PREPARED IN PRINCIPLE TO BE FORTHCOMING. CONCLUDED THAT FIRST SECTION OF THE MEETING RELAYING PRESIDENT FORD'S AND YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE CAREFUL APPROACH SYRIA IS TAKING TOWARD THE LEBANESE CRISIS AND SAID WE HAD MADE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SYRIA'S POLICY CLEAR IN OUR DISCUSSIONS WITH OTHER GOVERNMENTS IN THE AREA.

3. AFTER INTERPRETER LEFT US, I DELIVERED YOU PRIVATE MESSAGE, EMPHASIZING YOU WERE SPEAKING TO HIM AS A FRIEND AND NOT TRANSMITTING OFFICIAL USG VIEWS. RECALLED WE HAD TRIED TO KEEP SYRIA FROM GOING INTO LEBANON MILITARILY BUT THE PRESIDENT HAD TAKEN CERTAIN STRATEGIC DECISIONS WHICH NOW HAD THEIR OWN IMPERATIVES. NOW THAT SYRIA IS COMMITTEE MILITARILY, IT CANNOT WITHDRAW UNDER CONDITIONS WHICH WOULD CONSTITUTE IN EFFECT A VICTORY FOR ITS OPPONENTS. THE PRESIDENT MUST ACHIEVE A SITUATION IN WHICH HE CAN BE SURE THOSE GROUPS THAT ARE NOW HIS OPPONENTS WILL NOT CONDUCT POLICIES INCOMPATIBLE WITH HIS OBJECTIVES. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, HE MUST BE CAREFUL NOT TO GET BOGGED DOWN.

4. THE PRESIDENT SMILED BROADLY AT YOUR SUBSEQUENT POINTS, "THERE IS NO REWARD FOR LOSING IN MODERATION AND NO SUBSTITUTE IN SOME SITUATION FOR A MILITARY VICTORY." HE COMMENTED THAT PART OF YOUR PRIVATE MESSAGE NEATLY SUMMED UP HIS PROBLEM. HE COULD NOT WITHDRAW GIVING A VICTORY TO HIS OPPONENTS BUT JUST HOW WAS HE TO AVOID GETTING BOGGED DOWN;

5. HE EXPRESSED WARM APPRECIATION FOR OUR STATED SUPPORT FOR AN INDEPENDENT NATIONAL POLICY. THIS WAS THE BASIC
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PRINCIPLE GUIDING HIS LEADERSHIP OF SYRIA. HE WOULD ALWAYS INSIST UPON THIS PRINCIPLE.

6. AIRFIELDS IN SOUTH LEBANON:

CONCERNING THE AIRFIELDS UNDER CONSTRUCTION IN SOUTHERN LEBANON, ASAD SAID THAT HIS DIFFICULTY NOW IN DEALING WITH THEM WAS THAT NEITHER WAS IN AN AREA UNDER DIRECT SYRIAN

CONTROL. HIS ORIGINAL MISTAKE HAD BEEN NOT TO BELIEVE HIS INTELLIGENCE REPORTS THAT THESE AIRFIELDS WERE BEING BUILT. AS OF A WEEK AGO HE HAD BEEN TOLD THAT BOTH STRIPS WERE WITHIN A FEW DAYS OF COMPLETION AND WOULD BE ABLE TO HANDLE THE C-130 AND ITS ANTONOV EQUIVALENT. HE GAVE NO HINT OF WHAT, IF ANYTHING, HE INTENDED TO DO ABOUT THE USE OF THOSE FIELDS.

7. HUSSEIN AS A CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION:

IN NOTING THAT SEVERAL OF THE ISSUES HUSSEIN HAD TALKED TO US ABOUT IN RECENT WEEKS AFFECTING SYRIA WERE OF GREAT DELICACY, I WAS CAREFUL TO EMPHASIZE OUR LONGSTANDING FRIENDSHIP FOR AND TRUST IN HUSSEIN. HOWEVER, WE HESITATED TO TELL EVEN SO TRUSTED A FRIEND OUR REACTIONS ABOUT SUCH ISSUES WITHOUT HEARING DIRECTLY FROM ASAD THAT THIS IS THE CHANNEL HE WANTED TO USE. IT WOULD BE FINE WITH US IF THAT IS HIS DECISION; WE JUST WANTED IT AUTHENTICATED. ASAD REPLIED THAT HE FELT EXTREMELY CLOSE TO HUSSEIN. THEY WERE ON THE TELEPHONE TO ONE ANOTHER VIRTUALLY DAILY, DISCUSSING WITH COMPLETE FRANKNESS THE AREA SITUATION AND IN PARTICULAR THE LEBANESE CRISIS. HE WAS PLEASED WITH HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE KING AND CONSIDERED IT IN THEIR MUTUAL INTEREST THAT THEY HAD DEVELOPED MUTUALLY SUPPORTIVE TIES. THIS COULD HAVE POSITIVE RESULTS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE AREA. AT THE SAME TIME, ASAD ADDED, HE KNEW I WAS IN STEADY CONTACT WITH KHADDAM AND ASSUMED THERE WAS NO CONTRADICTION BETWEEN WHAT I HEARD FROM KHADDAM AND WHAT HUSSEIN HAD BEEN TELLING US. I REITERATED THAT THE ONLY POINT WE WISHED TO BE CERTAIN ABOUT WAS WHETHER IT WAS HIS DESIRE TO USE HUSSEIN AS A CHANNEL. THE PRESIDENT REPLIED THAT HE WOULD BEAR THIS IN MIND SO THERE WOULD BE NO GROUNDS FOR MISUNDERSTANDING.

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8. CUBAN INVOLVEMENT:

I STRESSED THAT WE WOULD CONSIDER IT A VERY GRAVE MATTER SHOULD NON-ARAB FORCES, WHETHER CUBAN OR OTHERS, TURN UP OPPOSING SYRIAN FORCES IN LEBANON AND THAT WE WOULD OPPOSE THIS BY ALL APPROPRIATE MEANS. SYRIA, ASAD REPLIED, HAS NO EVIDENCE OF DIRECT CUBAN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON. HOWEVER, CUBANS AND OTHER NON-ARABS, ACCORDING TO A VARIETY OF SYRIAN INTELLIGENCE REPORTS, ARE SUPERVISING RECRUITMENT, TRAINING AND SUPPLY EFFORTS FOR THE PLO/LEFTISTS.

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9. THIS LAST POINT LED ASAD TO VOLUNTEER THE FOLLOWING GLOOMY OVERVIEW OF LEBANESE DEVELOPMENTS: OUTSIDE INVOLVEMENT IS INCREASING. THE SITUATION IS FAR FROM STABILIZED AND HE SEES NO END IN SIGHT TO THE CONFLICT. HE WAS INFORMED TODAY, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT A SIZEABLE UNIT OF "VOLUNTEERS" HAD ARRIVED WITHIN THE LAST 48 HOURS IN THE PORT OF TRIPOLI TO JOIN THE PLO/LEFTISTS. THE POLITICAL PROCESS APPEARED TO BE STALLED. LOOKING DOWN THE ROAD HE SEES NO MAJOR TURNING POINT TOWARD A PEACEFUL SOLUTION. "THERE ARE NO LANDMARKS AHEAD."

10. CERTAIN ARAB COUNTRIES WERE QUIETLY TELLING SYRIA OF THEIR SUPPORT FOR ITS POLICIES BUT WERE UNWILLING EITHER TO COMMIT THEMSELVES PUBLICLY OR TO EXERCISE THE INFLUENCE WHICH THEY HAD OVER VARIOUS ELEMENTS IN THE PLO/LEFTIST COALITION. FOR EXAMPLE, DURING HIS LAST VISIT TO DAMASCUS IN JULY, PRINCE SAUD HAD OFFERED HIS SERVICES AS MEDIATOR TO SYRIA AND THE PLO BUT THE LATTER HAD REJECTED THIS OFFER. THE SAUDIS MADE NO FURTHER OVERTURE; THEY WERE TOO TIMID POLITICALLY. SAUDI ARABIA, ASAD CONTINUED, WAS A STATE WHICH COULD AND SHOULD BE MORE ACTIVE IN WORKING FOR A POLITICAL SOLUTION. THE SAUDIS, HE ADDED, SHOULD SEE IT CLEARLY IN THEIR INTEREST TO BE MORE GENEROUS FINANCIALLY WITH KING HUSSEIN.

11. THE PEACE PROCESS:

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LEBANON HAD BECOME THE TARGET OF ELEMENTS (UNSPECIFIED) IN THE ARAB WORLD WHICH SOULD TO UPROOT THE WHOLE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY AND BRING ABOUT A TOTAL REVOLUTION. LEBANESE COMMUNISTS WERE EFFECTIVELY EXPLOITING THE CURRENT IN LOCAL PUBLIC OPINION WHICH SOUGHT A CHANGE IN THE OLD LEBANON. THE USG AND OTHER COUNTRIES INTERESTED IN BRINGING ABOUT PEACEFUL EVOLUTION OF THE AREA SHOULD BE AWARE OF THAT DANGER IN THE LEBANESE CRISIS. IT WAS NOT JUST A QUESTION OF KEEPING LEBANON FROM BECOMING THE SPARK FOR AN AREA-WIDE CONFLAGRATION (I.E., IN THE ARAB-ISRAEL CONTEXT), NOR WAS IT SIMPLY A CIVIL WAR WHOSE LACK OF SOLUTION WOULD INHIBIT FUTURE PEACE EFFORTS. THE PROBLEM WAS MORE BASIC; IT DIRECTLY BORE ON THE FUTURE EVOLUTION OF THE ARAB WORLD. SAUDI ARABIA AND THE GULF STATES, TO MENTION BUT TWO, HAD A VITAL STAKE IN INSURING THAT ELEMENTS DEDICATED TO REVOLUTION DID NOT SUCCEED. A SOLUTION WOULD OBVIOUSLY NOT BE EASY. THERE WERE POWERFUL ELEMENTS WHICH OPPOSE ANY PEACEFUL EVOLUTIONARY SOLUTION FOR LEBANON.

12. HE CONCLUDED WITH A FURTHER EXPRESSION OF THANKS FOR YOUR PRIVATE MESSAGE AND ASKED THAT HIS WARMEST GREETINGS BE SENT TO THE PRESIDENT AND YOURSELF. TAKING LEAVE, I SAID THAT WE HAD NOT DISCUSSED THE SMERICAN ROLE IN LEBANON BUT I KNEW THAT YOU AT ANY TIME WOULD WELCOME SUGGESTIONS WHICH THE PRESIDENT MIGHT HAVE ABOUT WHAT WE COULD DO TO HELP BRING THAT CRISIS TO AN END.

13. COMMENT:

I WAS PLEASED WITH THE ATMOSPHERE OF THIS MEETING. ASAD WAS HIS NORMALLY COURTEOUS AND WARM SELF. HE PROLONGED OUR CONVERSATION, WAVING OUT HIS CHIEF OF PROTOCOL WHO TWICE ENTERED TO REMIND HIM OF OTHER APPOINTMENTS. HE SAID HE HAD INTERRUPTED HIS HOLIDAY IN LATTAKIA TO HANDLE CERTAIN DETAILS IN CONNECTION WITH THE FORMATION OF NEW CABINET AND HOPED TO RETURN TO THE COAST SHORTLY. THE CABINET, HE SAID, WOULD PROBABLY BE ANNOUNCED THIS EVENING.

14. I WAS STRUCK THAT BEYOND HIS REFERENCES TO SAUDI ARABIA AND JORDAN, HE SAID NOTHING SPECIFIC ABOUT ANY ARAB STATES EXCEPT FOR A FLEETING REFERENCE TO IRAQI EFFORTS TO
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RECRUIT "VOLUNTEERS" TO FIGHT IN LEBANON. HE MADE NO REFERENCE WHATSOEVER TO EGYPT OR LIBYA.

15. ASAD DID NOT FLATLY AUTHENTICATE HUSSEIN AS A CHANNEL BETWEEN US AND WE CAN PERHAPS EXPECT MORE DIRECT CONFIRMA-

TION IN THE FUTURE FROM DAMASCUS OF MESSAGES WHICH HE SPECIFICALLY INTENDS TO REACH WASHINGTON. THIS IS A SLIPPERY AREA AND I WAS CAREFUL TO EMPHASIZE OUR FULL CONFIDENCE IN THE KING LEST WE DO ANYTHING WHICH MIGHT DEPRIVE US OF THOSE INSIGHTS INTO ASAD'S THINKING WHICH HE MAY FIND EASIER TO CONFIDE THROUGH HUSSEIN.

16. I RECOMMEND THAT AFTER AN APPROPRIATE INTERVAL, WE AGAIN OFFER HIM SOME INTELLIGENCE REPORTS ABOUT SOVIET ACTIVITIES IN LEBANON. I THINK THIS CAN BE DONE WITHOUT CONVEYING THE HINT THAT WE ARE INTERESTED IN A COLD WAR COMPETITION WITH SYRIA AS THE PRIZE. FROM BOTH KHADDAM AND ASAD'S REACTIONS TO THOSE FEW ITEMS THAT WE DID SHARE, I FELT THAT THEY WERE NOT EXPECTING ANY ACTION FROM US AND THAT IT WAS ENOUGH FOR THEM TO KNOW WE HAD A PRETTY GOOD IDEA OF WHAT THE SOVIETS ARE UP TO. AT THIS JUNCTURE IN SYRIA'S LEBANESE INVOLVEMENT, I FIND IT HARD TO IMAGINE WHAT MORE WE CAN PROVIDE THAN A SYMPATHETIC EAR TO SYRIA. BUT THAT SEEMS TO BE A MUCH APPRECIATED POSTURE FOR US TO ADOPT. MURPHY

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